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ABSTRACT

It is necessary to understand the absence of women from the history of rhetoric in ways that shape an astute appreciation of women's silence and guide meaningful intellectual or critical conduct. Two ways to do this are to understand the absence either as the consequence of a virulent and systematic exclusion or as a regrettable omission. The former is anchored in various rationales about women's intellectual or physical inferiority and the latter an oversight attributable to the misogyny of Western culture and particularly to those who chronicle it. A review of a recent history of women in political and social discourse and an examination of the theoretical underpinnings of both viewpoints, however, leads to the conclusion that exclusion and omission must be coordinate imperatives for any effort to understand the absence of women from the history of rhetoric. If it is understood that consciousness of gender is a way to address women's exclusion and a transcendence of gender categories is a way to correct omission, then the problem seems to be the capacity to recognize these different imperatives without constructing an opposition between them. The document draws from and responds to Jean Bethke Elshtain's "Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought" (1981). (Three notes are included, and nine references are appended.) (MS)

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THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN FROM THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC

EXCLUSION OR OMISSION?

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THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN FROM THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC; EXCLUSION OR OMISSION

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In January of 1916, Kenneth Burke wrote his intimate friend Malcolm Cowley, asking him to destroy the two or three drawers of letters Burke sent him over the previous three years. His request followed the realization that it was impossible to express himself and that the effort to do so merely cheapened the silence which ". . . is the only great truth, the only mode of expression." Burke dared not "express to you in endless letters how inexpressible I am." He continues:

> We are all isolated entities and must learn to sink into ourselves. We must learn to bear up under the most terrible torture of life, silence. But I can not. I am filled too full of the love of expression to be silent, even though I know that silence is the only great truth . . . The most elemental tendency in me is my desire for the sympathy of intelligence--and the great truth of this burden of silence is its denial of the possibility of sympathy. But that is it--since I positively cannot accept the burden of passivity, I must have some one who can talk with me . . .(228)

The imperative which induced Burke to preserve his own silence by destroying the evidence of his expression is one that I understand more fully than I can say. For beyond the silence borne of existential isolation, which I "share" with Burke, is an engineered silence which is my cultural legacy as a woman. That silence haunts me as I teach my students the history of rhetoric and preach the connections between expression and personal excellence, public discourse and democracy, rhetoric and humanity. It tortures me as I scurry to append to the great volume of cultural lore a small footnote concerning women. The footnote is always pathetic. Women had no voice in the polis of ancient Greece. They rarely gained a voice in the subsequent centuries as the Greek refrains of rhetoric were un-earthed and then re-scored in the tempo of the times. Women's earnest and exciting attempts to enter the realm of public discourse or to expand it in their direction cut little ice and had always to be repeated in subsequent eras by women who longed for the traction a rhetorical tradition could provide. Hand-me-down dreams of the Christian era and the enlightenment were embraced by women only to be re-possessed by thinkers anxious to preserve the equation of "individual" and "human" with the category "male." Periods of feminist activism were always followed by "post-feminist" or "new woman" eras authorizing a new slippage into silence. My little footnote puts the best face on things but, like most cosmetics, it confirms an absence or lack even as it tries to conceal it. Just as Burke despaired for what he could not say about himself, I lament the task of speaking about a silence I cannot break. Yet, like Burke, I

am inclined to expression, seeking a sympathy of intelligence which understands and laments the silence with me. For it is not enough to find women missing. We need to ask important and intricate questions about the origins and consequences of their absence. We need to understand the absence in ways that shape an astute appreciation of it and guide meaningful intellectual or critical conduct. More than merely remarking upon the absence, we need ways to address it.

At least two understandings vie for our attention. We can understand the absence as the consequence of a virulent and systematic **exclusion**. By this view, women are not just silent, they are silenced by a variety of conditions or "considerations" created by those determined to make of rhetoric a manly art (Rosenthal). In the extreme, such an exclusion revokes all claims women make to rhetorical capacities, denying them access to the public forum and its attendant institutions (education, politics, religion, business). The exclusion is anchored in various rationales about women's intellectual or physical inferiority or, perversely, in claims of women's superior moral judgment or crucial social function (as mothers or hearth tenders) which would be imperiled if women ventured out of their "place" (Kraditor). Those who defy the exclusion, and thus disprove the rationale which anchors it, are deemed unwomanly. Regardless of the particular rationale employed, the exclusion makes women and rhetoric an incompatible or dangerous pair.

From a different vantage, we can understand the absence of women as a regrettable **omission**, an oversight attributable to the misogyny of Western culture and particularly to those who chronicle it. Best

known by its excesses, this misogyny is nonetheless permeable. By learning to see or seep through it, we can discover the rhetorical talents and accomplishments of women because they resemble those of men. Once the misogynist distortion is corrected, we see clearly how women "were there" as a force in history (Beard) and command(ed) the public forum with acumen and grace. The realm of rhetoric is discovered to be capacious enough to accommodate women without any major overhaul or renewal of its elemental principles or processes.

This paper examines both views with an eye toward discovering whether the absence of women from the history of rhetoric is an **exclusion** endemic to public rhetoric or whether the absence is an unfortunate but correctible **omission**. This determination is crucial to our conception of the history of rhetoric and our inquiries about it. If the art of public discourse does indeed derive its meaning by opposing or silencing the womanly, if rhetoric addresses or trains a capacity in some speakers by training an incapacity (Burke 1954) in others, then the effort to expand the realm of rhetoric to include women would confound its very nature or essence; the fundamental tension which defines the art would evaporate. Some inklings of this position are evident in Karlyn Campbell's observation that the rhetoric of women's liberation "wavers between the rhetorical and the non-rhetorical (1972 84)" and thus defies conventional conceptions of public discourse uttered by men.

If, on the other hand, rhetoric can encompass oppositional tensions, we may redeem it by correcting past omissions. Such an effort would recognize that the history of rhetoric is unfinished,

both in the sense that past history about women's discourse is waiting to be written and that rhetoric is still waiting to be humanized, despite the much celebrated efforts of its ancient oracles to do just that. Our enchantment with the "fathers of rhetoric" will look to us more like complacency and the task of overcoming their omissions will seem monumentally important. My undertaking proceeds as follows: I first review a recent history of women in political and social discourse for evidence supporting each of the viewpoints outlined above. I then turn each position over to examine theoretical underpinnings. Finally I balk before the choice I've posed and demonstrate how exclusion and omission must be coordinate imperatives for any effort to understand the absence of women from the history of rhetoric.

The Tragic Exclusion of Women

In her landmark survey of Western intellectual history, Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought (1981), Jean Bethke Elshtain ponders women's absence. Though the "major thinkers" from Plato to Marx provide diverse and even contrary opinions about women, they have had the monotonous effect of perpetuating female silence. Elshtain understands this silencing to have its origins in the partition of human life into two categories, public and private. Elshtain finds "distinctions between public and private have been and remain fundamental . . . ordering principles in all known societies save, perhaps, the most simple" (6). For most of Western history, these distinctions are sharply pointed; public and private spheres are

severed by sexual difference. Beginning in the polis of ancient Greece, men discovered what Elshtain terms "the agentic imperative, . . .the notion of politics as a form of action, an activity carried out by individuals with agency within and upon the world, rather than creatures through or to whom things simply happened" (13). When deliberations, contests and choices could be shared, a public consciousness emerged. However, the discovery of an "agentic imperative" depended upon a contrast or opposition to the private realm of discourse, the oikos or household, wherein "speech was severed from the name of action; it filled the air, echoed for a time, and faded from official memory" . . . (14). In this way, the glory of the polis was activated by an oppositional relation to oikos, and achievement of human excellence through public action presumed escape from a secondary realm of necessity inhabited by women but where excellence would not thrive.

Elshtain finds this tension to persist through nearly the entire course of Western philosophy. All definitions of the art of public discourse necessarily despise and defend against "the tug of the private . . . against the lure of the familial, against evocations of female power" (16). Rhetoric's nemesis, whether it be irrationality, a morality too narrowly personal, or unfettered desire, has always had a feminine figure. For Elshtain, the "good man speaking well" is always counterposed against the bad woman speaking not at all (94-95). The capacities cultivated by male rhetors hinge upon the silence of women and their exclusion from the realm of public discourse.

Aristotle was perhaps the most insistent and categorical about women's nature as mute, private beings. In his world, women were completely and perpetually consigned to the oikos, owing simultaneously to their irrationality, their blighted morality and their physical deformities (Elshtain 49). Here women fulfilled their potentia by providing the private functions (childbirth and rearing, domestic service) which permitted free male citizens to devote their leisure and energy to the polis. In this way, the private realm is "inferior to . . . but a functional pre-requisite to the realm of freedom" (Elshtain 47). So complete is his excision of public from private that Aristotle doesn't bother to condemn women who operate outside their place; since such a transgression is impossible, no alarm need be sounded. Women cannot trespass into the public realm because the human capacity which fits man for public life, "the faculty of language" (Politics 5-6) is furnished to the male alone.[1] Elshtain finds the opposition of polis to oikos fundamental to Greek culture.

> They [Greek women and men] were separated by social arrangements and practices, ideologies, valuations and the range and nature of spoken and written communication itself. Cut off from the philosophic speech of the symposia and the public speech of the agora, women's communications in classical antiquity would have taken on the very terms of their enforced isolation (67-68)

It would be hard to find a better example of what Burke has called, after Veblen, "trained incapacity: . . . a state of affairs whereby one's very abilities can function as blindnesses" (Permanence and Change 7). The preoccupation with the manly discourse of the polis necessarily requires a neglect or blindness concerning the speech of women. Further, the "defects" of female speech constitute the "qualities" of womanhood (submissiveness, passivity, pliability), qualities which must be preserved by training women not to exercise their capacities as symbol users. In this way, the loquacity of men shares a logical intimacy with the silence of women. They are "obverse and reverse of the same coin" (Permanence and Change 49).

This oppositional definition of rhetoric gains momentum as Elshtain moves from ancient Greece through succeeding centuries of Western thought. There are periods where distinctions between public and private completely erode, as under patriarchy.[2] In this case, social arrangements and conditions for discourse ". . . so thoroughly politicize the family and familialize the commonwealth that there is no room for individuals" . . . (Elshtain 103). What results is a curious fusion of the public with one particular individual, the king or ruler, who becomes "the only public person" while the rest of humanity falls silent to his will (Elshtain, quoting Walzer 105). This deviation only reinforces the power of the public versus private pattern established in Greece. Absent the opposition, public rhetoric dwindles and men submit to the silence previously ordained as women's lot.

Elshtain's journey through Western social and political thought reveals over and over again how politics and public rhetoric are defined in opposition to the private. However, Elshtain understands that winning her case is more a tragedy than a triumph. For finally, the oppositional dynamic she discovers and carefully documents leaves Elshtain hopelessly correct. Since the dynamic is fundamental, women will always be perpendicular to the line of rhetoric, intersecting its history only at isolated points.

I hope it has become clear that the stronger the case for the systematic exclusion of women, the more tragic and hopeless their absence becomes. Given the machinations of exclusion, women speaking are the aberrations Dr. Johnson named in his aphorism concerning dancing dogs ("A woman speaking is like a dog dancing on its hind legs. The issue isn't that they do it so poorly but that they do it at all"). As long as women remain perpendicular to the history of rhetoric, the exclusion is self-generating. Most importantly, the exclusion denies to women any discovery of the "agentic imperative" which can trigger the discovery of self and its stake in the world. As long as women's private speech is severed from the name of action and they are excluded from the realm where speech becomes action, women will continue to be the "done to" rather than the "doers."

The Follies of Women's Omission

Exceedingly uncomfortable with this development, Elshtain ends her book by offering a less "truthful" but more reassuring view. Pointing to the perpetual misogyny of Western culture, she excuses

great theorists who, perhaps unwittingly, perpetuate unfortunate views of women. Rather than decry their blindnesses or discount their contributions, Elshtain would have us finish the job they started. In the face of much that is "tragic, pathetic and heartbreaking," we must foreswear cynicism or disbelief and take on the "public imperative and responsibility" for reconstructing the spheres of public and private discourse (299). We must add woman to the history of rhetoric, not as an auxiliary or opposing figure, but as a speaking subject. Only in this way can we hope to supplement and/or overturn the insights of past thinkers and attempt to humanize the manly art.

With this, Elshtain turns away from the exclusionary practices of the past and faces the question of how to overcome or redress them in the present and future. "In our parlous age," Elshtain notes, "it is not enough to critique what is [or was]. The political thinker must imagine a livable future and proffer coherent proposals if he or she is to make a claim on the attention of others" (298). What Elshtain proposes is a re-orientation toward both public and private speech which will recognize and affirm women as symbol users, thus ending or at least eroding the trained incapacity which exclusion has enforced. This re-orientation is primarily forward-looking, carved as it is out of the silence of preceding eras. But the questions Elshtain poses as she seeks to redress the omission of women are fundamental to any attempt to understand the history of women's rhetoric. "What sort of language, public and private," Elshtain asks, "do . . . women begin to speak?" "What public and private

identities are embraced? How redescribe the social reality and experience of women?" (202-203). Most importantly, how do feminists "sort out which public and private experiences are ineradicably involved in what it means to be a human being within a world of others and which [experiences] can and should be transformed in order to reconstruct identity, experience and reality itself" (203).

In preparation for offering her own proposal, Elshtain reviews the answers to these questions supplied by radical, liberal, marxist and psychoanalytic feminism. In each instance, Elshtain makes two requirements. First, a re-conceptualization of public and private must maintain a distinction between the two realms. So fundamental is the mental equipment of public and private that feminists can't forego some distinction. She is particularly attuned to the features of the private realm which have been disparaged both by their comparison to the public and by feminists themselves. Elshtain reminds us that families are fundamental, even when they bear little relation to fundamentalist definitions of family. She speaks fondly of the private realm as a "little world" which must be "tended," "keeping alive its life-redeeming joys and tragedies" (305). Secondly, Elshtain considers how a remedy for omission must constitute the female subject in both private and public realms. This effort requires both a refusal "to accept the political silencing of women" and a pledge to make the "self-understanding of the female subject an essential feature" (302-303) of the history of rhetoric. In other words, women need to name themselves rather than pledge allegiance to the names they inherit from their silent pasts.

Such naming must consider both the private and public dimensions of women's lives considering her status as individual and as citizen. Finally, the naming must be fortified with a facility for critical reflection so that women's namings can: 1) defy past namings, 2) be subject to reappraisal and revision and 3) serve as an "agentic imperative."

Perhaps the best way to illustrate these two requirements is to review Elshtain's conclusion that contemporary feminists of the radical and liberal persuasions fail to meet them. Radical feminists violate the first requirement when they live out the meaning of their creed, "the personal is political." This equation dislodges the necessary distinction between the public and private dimensions of life. "What is asserted," Elshtain notes, "is an identity, a collapse of the one into the other. Nothing 'personal' is exempt, then, from political definition, direction and manipulation. The private sphere falls under a thoroughgoing politicized definition" (217). In their politicizing of the private, Elshtain finds radical feminists in league with defenders of patriarchy. Radical feminists also fail the second test Elshtain administers. They fail to constitute female subjects when they resuscitate the metaphor of patriarchy and dwell upon its power to silence and victimize women. Elshtain cautions that to dwell upon the powerlessness of women is to prolong their incapacity. "Told she is the Universal Victim; told that an implacable foe will frustrate her at every turn". . . a woman is hard-pressed to respond to the "agentic imperative" (228). We must "serve as witnesses for the victims . . . without at the same

time falling into a political identity, language and mode of practice that sentimentalizes their victimization and repeats the terms of their degradation" (300). Radical feminists, then, seem to be still mired in the paradox of exclusion.

Liberal feminists err on both these counts as well, but in different ways. Although they preserve a distinction between public and private, Elshtain faults them for accepting the distinction already in place in the social system they seek to change. Tracing this division back to the 19th century suffrage movement, Elshtain demonstrates how suffragists embraced the "sexual Manichaeism" of the nineteenth century as they argued for the moral superiority of women and the need to extend her dominion of the private realm to the public. By turning "anti-Suffrage arguments upside down to serve as the basis for a pro-Suffrage plea,"(231) Stanton and others reinforce and legitimate an antagonistic opposition between public and private which eventually dooms the movement. Contemporary liberal feminists are caught in a similar, but less striking conceptual dilemma. They vacillate between urging women to dirty their hands in the nasty, amoral political system and urging women to draw upon the moral sensitivity and purity they cultivate in the private realm to tame and tranquilize the obnoxious political system. Thus, Elshtain argues, liberal feminists fail "to articulate a transformative feminist vision of public and private" (249). Liberal feminists also fail to enable women to constitute themselves as speaking subjects. In contrast to radicals who reinforce or eulogize female silence, liberal feminists, in particular Betty Friedan, assume that the task

of self-authoring has been accomplished by most women, especially young women, and that no more resources or attention need to be devoted to this effort. According to Friedan, most women settle the issue of identity by unceremoniously adopting the persona of the professional man, entering the rat race with the material and mental garb suited to life in corporate America. Elshtain reminds us how narrow and unsuited this version of self strikes women outside the white middle class.

Elshtain offers important and convincing evidence that modern feminists have yet to create a transformative vision of public and private. But she herself commits grievous errors in the name of correcting omission. Her errors relate directly to the requirements she uses to fault feminists. In urging women to reconceptualize private and public, she apparently assumes that they can do so with little or no regard for current alignments. The transformative vision she urges apparently can be cut from the cloth of our experience as humans in the world of other humans rather than in response to the Manichean oppositions of public and private, male and female. But if the exclusion thesis is to carry any weight at all, Elshtain must admit that the thread of this cloth, the textile of humanity, is still being woven, and that the pattern of the weave is yet to be discernible. What's more, the effort to invent a transformative vision of human life is always frought with perplexity, particularly the perplexity attending the equation of male with human accomplished by the exclusion of women from the

public realm. Simone De Beauvoir makes the point in The Second Sex:

> . . . the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of **man** to designate human beings in general. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities . . .circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature (in New French Feminisms, 43).

Elshtain's appreciation of this conflation of male with human is not nearly fearsome enough. She merely observes that the vision of public and private she seeks must originate and be limited by whatever "is ineradicably involved in what it means to be a human being within a world of others" (203) but this is apparently easily decided. She considers not at all how our ideas of humanity are entangled in our conception of masculinity, since previous definitions of humanity have excluded women. In The Man-Made World (1909), Charlotte Perkins Gilman addresses the perplexity Elshtain ignores. "We are so taken up with the phenomena of masculinity and feminity, that our common humanity has largely escaped notice" (23). What obscures our conception of humanity is the fact that "we have, so far, lived and suffered and died in a man-made world [where] . . .

all human standards have been based on male characteristics" (22). While contemplation of "human-ness" can serve as a corrective, it should begin with the acknowledgement that our current conceptions of humanity bear the mark of female exclusion. Perhaps Elshtain should show more understanding or patience with feminists who err in their efforts to defy or alter current conceptions.

A second error arises as Elshtain redresses the omission of women by conceiving of ways to constitute the female subject. She desires to give women the opportunity to name themselves, to account for and reflect upon their own dilemmas or excellences. Such naming can occur only in an arena "in which human speech or discursive reflection is undominated, uncoerced, unmanipulated, in an approximation of Jurgen Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' (311).[3] Critics must engage women "from a stance that respects their human possibility for the creation of meaning through uncoerced dialogue . . a stance of empathy, openness, and a willingness to entertain or explore alternatives she may not share" (312) Yet, in analyzing and finding fault with various feminist texts, Elshtain fails to provide such an arena. Nor does she acknowledge that the texts did not benefit from an "ideal speech situation" when they were first presented or that they address the **absence** of such an arena. Since women's rhetoric has yet to inhabit an ideal speech situation, one wonders how "empathetic" or "understanding" it is to judge it as discourse emanating from such an oasis. My objection here should not be understood as a grouse about Elshtain's disagreement with other feminists; disagreement can and does occur in ideal speech

situations. Rather, I am concerned that Elshtain does not give the feminists she studies the benefit and courtesy of careful reading, even while expecting them to alter rather than address the non-ideal situations they face.

The follies of omission are evident in Elshtain's critique. When the goad for a "transformative vision of public and private" detaches itself completely from the concern for exclusion, the result is likely to be disappointing. What we dream is so much more than what we have that we are likely to despair of ever enacting it. Further, the dream is less serviceable to the extent that it ignores the exclusion which is attempts to correct.

Conclusion

Perhaps now it is evident why I balk at the choice implied in my title. We must address the absence of women from the history of rhetoric as **both** an exclusion **and** an omission, considering how these two stand in relation to each other. An over-emphasis on exclusion only perpetuates it, depriving women of the "lift" necessary to break their silence. A recasting of absence as omission opens up possibilities for visions and inventions which rise above our conceptions of rhetoric past and present, but these may elude us if not tethered to the ground where we stand, often in silence. While others may see these twin imperatives as the horns of a dilemma, I think they may offer the chance to throw sand in the bull's face. For instance, when Campbell discusses the knot tied at the very center of feminist ideology, the conflict between claims women make

to personhood and claims to womanhood, we may see them as dual but not contradictory efforts. As women, feminists announce and condemn their exclusion. As female humans, they seek to correct that omission without repeating it to the detriment of themselves or others. Why can't feminists claim simultaneously to be both persons and women? Similarly, the twin imperatives of exclusion and omission may explain what Pearce and Rossi (1984) have coyly termed the "problematic practices of feminism." They remark that "feminists simultaneously demand increased consciousness of gender (in order to sensitize persons to discriminatory practices) and an absence of gender consciousness (as the prescription for a better system . . .)" (283). Such demands create dilemmas for men talking to feminists because "there is no clear prescription about how they should act." But if we understand that consciousness of gender is a way to address women's exclusion and a transcendence of gender categories is a way to correct omission then the problem seems to be the capacity to recognize these different imperatives without constructing an opposition between them. The dilemma seems to arise not from feminism, but from the implicit demand for only one position, when only two (or more) will do. As Elshtain reminds us, "ambivalence and conflict is the wellspring of live lived reflectively and we are all enriched by the messy reality which is our lot" (352).

Like Kenneth Burke, I must pay homage to silence as the "only great truth" about women and the history of rhetoric. But because I and most other women are "filled too full with the love of expression" we cannot let that silence speak for us. I know little

of Malcolm Cowley and his achievements. But being at the same time the kind of person Burke could ask "after much thinking, after much weighing in the balance" (Jay 226) to destroy the letters and the kind of person who would not has earned him my humble gratitude.

ENDNOTES

[1]Elshtain acknowledges the absurdity of Aristotle's position when she notes that women have always been equipped to speak, even in ancient Greece. She finds Aristotle acknowledging his own absurdity when, in a minor counterpoint to this position, he conceded that language was a human capacity found in women as well as men. But this concession does not signal any surrender of his androcentric focus on public language, of which he thought women incapable.

[2]Elshtain defines patriarchy much more narrowly than do many contemporary feminists who employ the term. While she understands patriarchy to be a powerful metaphor for solidifying a feminist position, she considers the term to name a "pre-capitalist social form" based on landholding, the absolute power of the private father and the public one (king), ownership and inheritance of property limited to men and obligatory betrothal and domestication for women. Accordingly, patriarchy ended centuries ago for Elshtain, even though its symbolic trappings (metaphors and images) keep its idea alive if not enacted.

[3]It would be natural to this point in the essay to test Elshtain's call for "ideal speech situations" against Habermas's conception of this term. But Elshtain borrows little more than the label, and remains strangely unconversant with Habermas. When questioned about her borrowing of Habermas's term at the end of a

public lecture, Elshtain demurred, saying that she preferred not to address that question until she had considered Habermas in greater detail (Public lecture by Jean Elshtain, Wake Forest University, Fall of 1986).

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